

STORY OF THE FUR TRADER.

BY NORMAN DUNCAN.

"Wouldn't think I'd been born on Cherry Hill, would you now?" said my new acquaintance.

Aboard the Virginia Lake, five miles off the coast of Labrador, and bound down, was far enough away from a New York tenement district to excuse my glance of surprise.

"Fact!" said he, with a nod. "That's where I was born and bred. And do you know how I came to be up here? No? Well, I'm a fur trader. I'm the man that bought the skin of that silver fox last winter for \$30 and sold it for \$250. I'd rather be the man that bought it from me and sold it in London for \$600. But I'm not."

"And you're bound for home, now?" I asked.

"Yes," he drawled. "I'm bound home for New York to see the folks. I've been away for six years, and came nearer to leaving my bones up here in the north last spring than ever I did before. I've done some traveling in my time. You can take me at my word; I have."

The trader laughed uproariously. He was greatly pleased to meet a man from "the States," and he was in a voluble mood. I knew that he needed but little encouragement to tell me the story of his escape.

"It makes me think about that old riddle of the corked bottle," he said. "Ever hear it? This is it: If you had a bottle of ginger ale, how would you get the stuff out without breaking the bottle or drawing the cork? Can you answer that?"

"The answer doesn't occur to me," said I.

"That's just it," he burst out. "The way to do it doesn't occur to you." But if you had the bottle in your hands now and wanted the ginger ale, it would occur to you fast enough to push the cork in. Well, that was my case. You think of yourself on a little pan of ice, drifting straight out to sea with a strong offshore wind, water all round you and no paddle—just think of yourself in that case, and a way of getting ashore might not occur to you. But once you're there—once you're right on that pan of ice, with the hand of death on your collar—you'll think like lightning of all the things you can do. Yes, that was my case."

I said nothing to interrupt the stocky, hard-featured, ill-clad little man while he mused.

"Don't you be fool enough to try to cross the bay this evening," says I to myself," he went on.

"But I'm a hundred-mile man, and I'd gone my hundred miles. I can carry grub on my back to last me just that far; and my grub was out. From what I knew of wind and ice, I judged that the ice would be four or five miles out to sea by dawn of the next day. So I didn't start out with the idea that

the trip would be as easy as a promenade over Brooklyn bridge of a moonlight night. Oh, no! I knew what I was doing. But it was a question of taking the risk or dragging myself into the settlement at Raquet Harbor in three days' time as lean as a car-horse from starvation. You see, it was forty miles round that bay and four across; and—my grub was out. Many a man loses his life in these parts by looking at the question in just that way.

"Oh, no!" says I to myself. "You'd much better take your chance of starving, and walk round."

"It wasn't in human nature, though, to do it. Not when I saw that there was grub and a warm fire waiting for me at Raquet Harbor. Says I: 'I'll take the long chance and stand to win.' Don't you run away with the idea that the ice was a level field stretching from shore to shore, fitting the rocks and kept as neat as a baseball diamond. It wasn't. Some day in the winter the wind had jammed the bay full of big rough chunks—they call them pans in this country—and the frost had stuck them all together. When the spring came, of course the sun began to melt that glue, and the whole floe was just ready to fall apart when I had the bad luck to make the coast. I was a day too late. I knew it. And I knew that the offshore wind would sweep the ice to sea the minute it broke up.

"I made the first hundred yards in ten minutes; the second in fifteen more. In half an hour I'd made half a mile. The ice was rough enough and flimsy enough to take the nerve out of any man.

"But that wasn't the worst; the worst was that there were hundreds of holes covered with a thin crust of snow—all right to look at, but treacherous. I knew that if I made the mistake of stepping on a crust instead of solid ice, I'd go through and down.

"I had four otter skins, some martens and ten fine fox skins in the pack on my back. To do anything in the water with that handicap was too much for me. So I wasn't at all particular about making time until I found that the night would catch me if I didn't wag along a little faster.

"No, sir," the trader said, looking me deep in the eyes. "I didn't want to be caught out there in the dark.

"By good luck, I struck some big pans about half-way over. Then I took to a dog-trot, and left the yards behind me in a way that cheered me up. Just before dusk I got near enough to the other side to feel proud of myself, and I began to think of what a fool I'd have been if I'd taken the shore route. A minute later I changed my mind. I felt the pack moving! Well, in a flash I said good-by to Cherry Hill and the boys. Not many men are caught twice in a place like that. They never have the second chance.

"There I was, aboard a rotten floe and bound out to the big, lone-

ly ocean, at the rate of four miles an hour.

"Oh, you might as well get ready to go, Jim," thinks I. But I didn't give up. I loped along shoreward in a way that didn't take snow crust or air-holes into account. And I made the edge of the floe before the black hour of the night had come.

"There was a couple of hundred yards of cold water between me and the shore.

"This is the time you think more of your life than your fur," thinks I.

"There was a stray pan or two—little rafts of things—lying off the edge of the floe; and beyond them, scattered between the shore and me, half a dozen other pans were floating. How to get to the other side was a puzzle. They were 50 or 60 yards apart, most of them, and I had no paddle. It was foolish to think of making a shift with my jacket for a sail; the wind was out, not in, and I had no rudder.

"What had I? Nothing that I could think of. It didn't occur to me, as you say. I wish it had.

"Anyhow," says I to myself, "I'll get as far as I can."

"It was a short leap from the floe to the first pan. I made it easily. The second pan was farther off, but I thought I could jump the water between. So I took off my pack and threw it on the ice beside me. It almost broke my heart to do it, for I'd walked 500 miles in the dead of winter for that fur; I'd been nearly starved and frozen, and I'd paid out hard-earned money. I put down my pack, took a short run, and jumped like a stag for the second pan.

"I landed on the spot I'd picked out. I can't complain of missing the mark, but instead of staying there, I shot clear through and down into the water.

"Surprised? I was worse than that. I was dead scared. For a minute I thought I was going to rise under the ice and drown right there.

"How it happened I don't know; but I came up between the pans, and struck out for the one I'd left. I got to the pan all right and climbed aboard. There I was on a little pan of ice, beyond the reach of the floe and leaving the shore behind me, and cold and pretty well discouraged.

"There's the riddle of the corked bottle," said the trader, interrupting his narrative. "Now, how do I happen to be sitting here?"

"I'm sure I can't tell," said I.

"No more you should," said he, "for you don't know what I carried in my pack. But you see I had the bottle in my hands, and I wanted the ginger ale bad; so I thought fast and hard.

"It struck me that I might do something with my line and jigger. A jigger, you know, is a lead fish, about three inches long, which spreads into two big barbed steel hooks at one end; the other end is tied to about 40 fathoms of stout, waxed fishing line. The fishermen of the coast use them to jerk big cod out of the water when

there is no bait.

"Don't you see the chance the barbed steel hook and the 40 fathom of line gave me? When I thought of that jigger, I felt just like the man who is told to push the cork in when he can't draw it out.

"I'd got back to the pan where I'd thrown down my pack, you know; so there was the jigger right at hand.

"It was getting dark by this time—getting dark fast, and the pans were drifting farther and farther apart.

"It was easy to hook the jigger in the nearest pan and draw my pan over to it; for that pan was five times the weight of the one I was on. The one beyond was about the same size; they came together at the half-way point. Of course this took time. I could hardly see the shore then, and it struck me that I might not be able to find it at all, when I came near enough to cast my jigger for it.

"About 50 yards off was a big pan. I swung the jigger round and round and suddenly let the line shoot through my fingers. When I hauled it in the jigger came too, for it hadn't taken hold. That made me feel bad. I felt worse when it came back the second time. But I'm not one of the kind that gives up. I kept right on casting that jigger until it landed in the right spot.

"My pan crossed over as I hauled in the line. That was all right; but there was no pan between me and the shore.

"All up!" thinks I.

"It was dark. I could see neither pan nor shore. Before long I couldn't see a thing in the pitchy blackness.

"All the time I could feel the pan humping along toward the open sea. I didn't know how far off the shore was. I was in doubt about just where it was.

"Is this pan turning round?" thinks I. Well, I couldn't tell; but I thought I'd take a flier at hooking a rock or a tree with the jigger. The jigger didn't take hold. I tried a dozen times, and every time I heard it splash the water. But I kept on trying—and would have kept on till morning if I'd needed to. You can take me at my word, I'm not the kind of fool that gives up—I've been in too many tight places for that. So, at last I gave the jigger a fling that landed it somewhere where it held fast; but whether ice or shore I couldn't tell. If shore, all right; if ice, all wrong; and that's all I could do about it.

"Now," thinks I, as I began to haul in, "it all depends on the fishing line. Will it break, or won't it?"

"It didn't. So the next morning, with my pack on my back, I tramped round the point to Raquet Harbor."

"What was it?" was my foolish question. "Shore or ice?"

"If it hadn't been shore," said the trader, "I wouldn't be here."

Whereupon he went below, for the dinner bell was ringing.—*Youth's Companion.*